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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Monday, May 22, 1933, Department of Agriculture

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SUBJECT: "Making Bread at Home." Information from the Bureau of Home Economics, U.S.D.A.

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Once upon a time the test of a good housekeeper was the bread she made. Those were the days when many a housewife made her own yeast bread as a matter of course, when one day a week was set aside as baking day. On that day the house was filled with the delicious odor of new bread. Grandmother's ways are again popular with many economical housekeepers today. Many who must run their homes on a small pocketbook are making at home instead of buying ready-mades. They're doing their own canning, pickling and preserving, raising their own fruits and vegetables, making their own soap and baking their own bread. Baking Day is once more on the household schedule. And homemade bread, rolls, biscuit and coffee cake appear at the dinner table.

You old timers at cooking already know the simple facts of making yeast bread. But a whole new generation of housewives are with us who have never before made bread. They're asking questions. So we're talking especially to them today.

Bread making may seem a long and difficult process to the beginner. But actually it is simple. Be sure to follow a reliable recipe exactly and to be careful about exact measurements.

The whole process of making yeast bread, our so-called staff of life, depends on a microscopic one-celled plant called yeast. We grow this plant in bread dough and it makes the dough rise. Like many other plants, yeast needs three things for favorable growth--moisture, warmth and food. As yeast grows it throws off a gas called carbon dioxide. And the bubbles of this gas forming in the dough cause it to rise.

So you soften the yeast with lukewarm water, if you are using a yeast cake. Liquid yeast has its own moisture. Then you use more lukewarm liquid perhaps potato water or perhaps milk according to your recipe. Then the dough is mixed, you set it in a warm place to rise. But that's not the end of the story. After the yeast begins to grow and the dough to rise, you have guide the growth. And finally you kill the yeast plants when you bake the bread. Kneading the dough is to develop gluten and give the bread its elastic texture.

There's the bare outline of bread making. And we won't go into all the details of the process, since you can get those from any reliable cookbook. But let's discuss some of the whys and wherefores of the process, so you'll understand the reason for many of the directions in the cookbook.

First, about the ingredients. What ingredients do you need to make a loaf of good yeast bread? Most bread contains just six ingredients.



These are flour, liquid--which is often milk, salt, sugar, shortening, yeast.

The specialists recommend bread flour from hard-wheat for homemade yeast bread, because it contains the most gluten. The gluten is what gives the dough elastic quality so it can expand and hold within it the gas bubbles formed by the yeast. You can use soft-wheat flour, but this requires a stiffer dough--more flour and less liquid.

The liquid for bread may be water or scalded milk or potato water. Milk gives bread more food value and helps it keep fresh longer. You can use milk in its various forms--dried, canned or fresh.

Now about shortening. Fat makes bread more tender and adds to its fuel value. You can use butter, lard or any other good cooking fat. Melt it before you add it to the bread mixture.

To the liquid you add not only melted fat but also sugar and salt. A little sugar in the dough makes it rise more quickly and helps give a golden brown color to the crust. Salt you add for good flavor in the bread, not to help the yeast grow. In fact, a little too much salt will hinder the growth. So use only enough to bring out the wheat flavor.

Now about the yeast. Back in earlier days our grandmothers all used to grow their own yeast in what they called a "starter" or "liquid yeast." Some housewives still use starters and consider them convenient and economical. Nowadays you can buy yeast in either dry or compressed cakes. The dry cakes keep better than the other forms, but they take longer to make bread. The yeast plants in them are not growing actively and take extra time to get started. The compressed yeast cakes are probably the most expensive but also the most convenient to use if you can get them fresh. But compressed yeast spoils easily, so must be kept in the refrigerator. With compressed yeast you make bread by the quick, straight-dough method, where all ingredients are added together. With dry yeast you use the overnight sponge method.

So much for the ingredients. What about temperature? Too much heat is as bad for yeast growth as chilling. The best temperature for dough during rising is between 80 to 85 degrees F. To keep the dough at that constant temperature, cover your bread bowl or pan and set it in a vessel of water. In a cool room, have the water 90 or 95 degrees. In hot weather when the air is warmer, have the water slightly cooler. Then a sponge or starter is to stand overnight, protect it against drafts and chilling by covering it well and keeping it in a warm room.

Stopping the rising of the dough at the right point is important. When the mass in the pan has doubled in bulk, punch it down to its original size and let it rise the second time. If it stands too long before punching down an unpleasant or sour flavor may develop and the gluten will be injured. If the dough rises too high in the pans before baking, it will be coarse grained. If it doesn't rise enough, it will be heavy. How to tell when the dough has risen enough? Test it by touching the surface lightly with your finger. If a slight depression remains, it has risen enough. If the dough is still elastic and the depression disappears quickly, let it rise a little longer.

As for baking temperature, have your oven medium--about 400 degrees F. Baking will take from 45 minutes to an hour. Generally, it is a good plan to turn your baking tins around after 20 minutes of baking so the loaves will bake evenly.

